



· BREED PRIORITIES · **FLAT-COATED RETRIEVER**

This article is not intended to promote fault or part judging. Nor is it to imply that any characteristic called for in the standard is unimportant. Judging, and breeding, is about prioritizing and about what the judge or breeder will forgive. Discussing priorities can help in learning how to better evaluate a breed.

Questions, Comments or Concerns?
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BY NIKKI RIGGSBEE

The breed standard for the Flat-Coated Retriever includes one of my favorite phrases describing a breed - "power without lumber and raciness without weediness." The standard also lists the "distinctive and most important features" of the breed in the General Appearance section - silhouette (moving and standing), smooth effortless movement, head type, coat, and character. They reflect the five items of breed type in Richard Beauchamp's book, by the way. It is helpful when breed standards provide us with explicit priorities. I looked for the survey that this article is based on to corroborate and elaborate their priorities.

We found thirty-nine Flat-Coated Retriever experts to invite to participate in a survey on their breed, although three had email addresses that bounced. Twenty-nine agreed to participate. This article is based on the twenty-three completed surveys. The group contributing averaged nearly thirty-three years in the breed. Those who judge have been doing so for over six years on average, and several have judged their national specialty and other breed specialties.

Flat-Coated Retriever Virtues

The survey included a list of Flat-Coated Retriever desirable characteristics taken from their breed standard for the experts to prioritize. Below is the list of these in sequence by the average ranks, with one being the most important.

1. One piece head
2. Sound, efficient, smooth, effortless movement
3. Confident, happy, outgoing attitude...good natured, friendly to all
4. Topline strong, level
5. Strong, but elegant
6. Muzzle nearly equal in length & breadth to skull
7. Prominent prow
8. Well laid back shoulders
9. Substance - Moderate. Medium bone
10. Deep chest tapering to a moderate tuck-up
11. Length of body slightly more than height
12. Hindquarters powerful, angulation in balance with front
13. Neck strong, slightly arched, moderately long
14. Feet oval or round, medium-sized, tight with well-arched toes & thick pads
15. Coat moderate length density & fullness, with high lustre, flat lying
16. Height 23-24½" for dogs, 22-23½" for bitches

This group was mostly consistent with the five "distinctive and most important features" from the standard. Eighteen had "One piece head" (1st) and fourteen had "Sound, efficient, smooth, effortless movement" (2nd) both in the top quartile. "Confident, happy, outgoing attitude...good natured, friendly to all" (3rd) had a split opinion, with eight putting it first in the list, ten in the top quartile, and another five around the middle.

"Silhouette" wasn't in the list explicitly, but many virtues in the list contribute to outline, including several items named "In silhouette" in the standard - head, neck, shoulders, topline, chest, tuck up, and prow. Interestingly, "Coat moderate length density & fullness, with high lustre, flat lying" (15th) was not ranked highly by nearly seventy percent of the group.

"Height 23-24½" for dogs, 22-23½" for bitches" (16th) was put in one of the last three places by all of the experts. Fourteen agreed on "Hindquarters powerful, angulation in balance with front" (12th) and "Feet oval or round, medium-sized, tight with well-arched toes & thick pads" (14th). "Neck strong, slightly arched, moderately long" (13th) was similarly valued by thirteen. "Strong, but elegant" (5th) and "Well laid back shoulders" (8th)

had the smallest majorities.

Some of the virtues that placed high or low on the list had consistent opinions. But some of the others were split. The majority had "Strong/elegant" (5th) in or near the top quartile, while five were at or near the bottom quartile. "Shoulders" (8th) had a similar split, but less extreme. "Hindquarters" (12th) was mostly in the third quartile, while seven had them more important. "Neck" (13th) and "Feet" (14th) were similarly divided.

Those without majorities had bipolar views. Ten thought "Topline strong, level" (4th) middling important, but nine had it in or near the top quartile. "Muzzle nearly equal in length & breadth to skull" (6th) was at or in the top quartile on eleven surveys, around the middle on six, and towards the bottom on five. Eleven put "Prominent prow" (7th) around the second quartile, while seven thought it more important. Another eleven had "Substance - Moderate. Medium bone" (9th) ranked from 6 to 9, but seven were at or near the bottom quartile.

"Deep chest tapering to a moderate tuck-up" (10th) split three ways: eight in the second quartile, eight in the third quartile, and five in the top quartile. "Length of body slightly more than height" (11th) had similar numbers, but in different directions: eight ranked it 2 to 5, another eight in the third quartile, and five in the bottom quartile.

Nine of the virtues had majority opinions. "Height" (16th) was more than three points below the adjacent virtue, confirming its place at the bottom. "Substance/bone" (9th) and "Chest/tuck-up" (10th) averaged less than one-tenth of a point apart, so additional input might change their relative ranks.

Flat-Coated Retriever Faults

The experts were also asked to prioritize a list of faults taken directly from or derived from their standard. The faults are listed below in sequence by the average ranks, with one being the most serious.

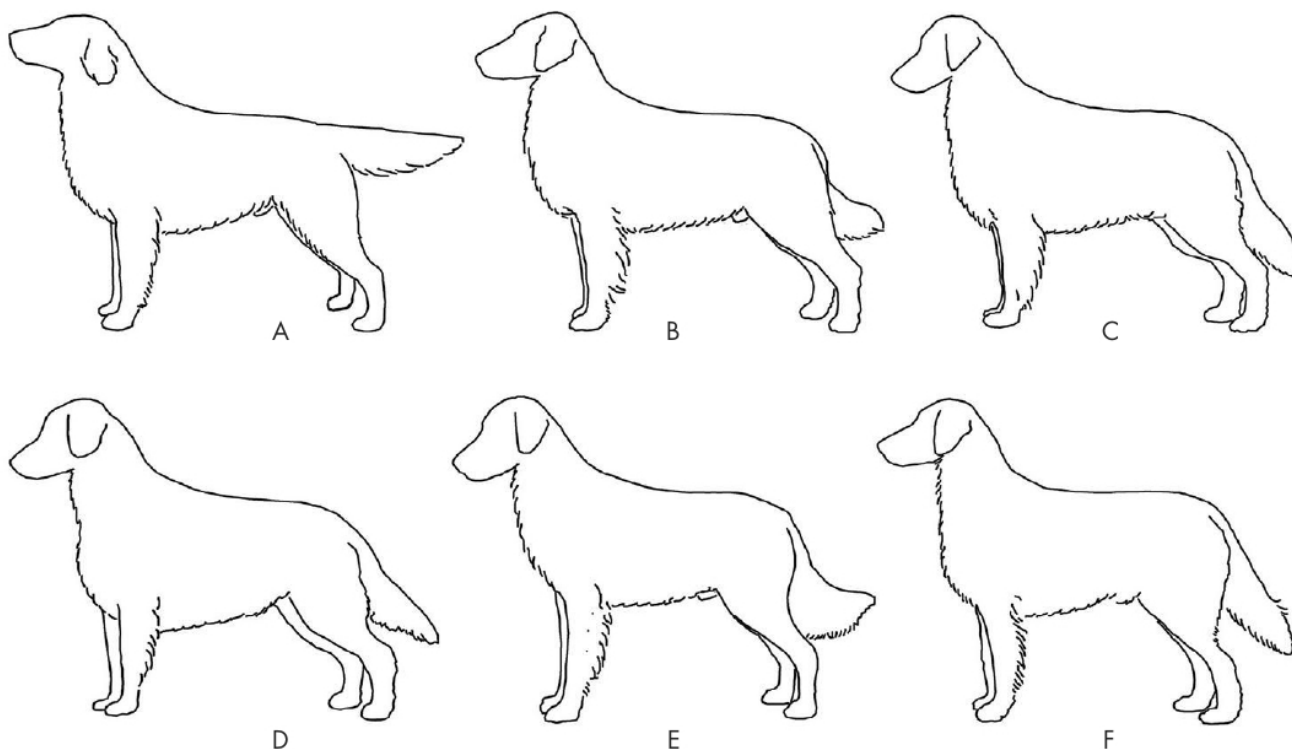
1. Nervous, hyperactive, apathetic, shy, or obstinate
2. Movement choppy, mincing, or ponderous
3. Massive or coarse; weedy, fine
4. Cobby
5. Down or dish-faced appearance
5. Eyes large, round, or yellow
7. Loin weak or loosely coupled
8. Exaggeration of stop or cheek
9. Wry, undershot, or overshot
9. Short legged
11. Tail carried much above level of back
12. Coat curly, wooly, short, silky, or fluffy
13. Shaving or barbering of head, neck, or body coat
14. Ears low set
15. Excess weight
16. Size varying more than an inch either way from preferred height

"Size varying more than an inch either way from preferred height" (16th) was in the bottom quartile on all but one survey,

Flat-Coated Retriever Outlines

Pick Best of Breed and Best of Opposite Sex

DOGS



consistent with the corresponding virtue's position. Nineteen had "Nervous, hyperactive, apathetic, shy, or obstinate" (1st) in the top quartile, with fifteen placing it first. Temperament is important in Flat-Coats, and as with other breeds, more serious when atypical.

"Excess weight" (15th) had eighteen agreeing, and "Ears low set" (14th) had seventeen. Sixteen ranked "Down or dish-faced appearance" (tied at 5th) from 6 to 9. "Movement choppy, mincing, or ponderous" (2nd) placed in the top quartile on fourteen surveys, but six ranked it 6 to 9, lowering its position. Another fourteen surveys had "Short legged" (tied at 9th) in the middling ranks.

Thirteen of the experts agreed on "Massive or coarse; weedy, fine" (3rd) and on "Cobby" (4th). The smallest majorities ranked "Eyes large, round, or yellow" (tied at 5th) 6 to 9 and "Loin weak or loosely coupled" (7th) 3 to 6. Seven others put "Eyes" 3 to 5, raising its position in the list. Ten others had "Loin" middling and lower, putting its position lower on the list.

Several faults had eleven in agreement, with a smaller group tilting the score up or down from the larger group. "Exaggeration of stop or cheek" (8th) was second quartile for eleven, but well below average for six. "Tail carried much above level of back" (11th) was 10 to 13 for eleven, but eight in the second quartile gave

it a more serious rank. Eleven put "Coat curly, wooly, short, silky, or fluffy" (12th) 6 to 9, but eight in or near the last quartile put it lower on the list. "Shaving or barbering of head, neck, or body coat" (13th) was in the last quartile for eleven, but eight put it in the third quartile.

"Wry, undershot, or overshot" (tied at 9th) had a three-way split. Nine put it 2 to 5; seven had it in the bottom quartile; and another six ranked it around the middle.

There were eleven faults with majority agreement, two more than with the virtues. Additional input would break the ties at fifth and ninth. "Weak loin" (7th) and "Too much stop/cheek" (8th) were less than one-tenth of a point apart and could change positions if there were another survey or more in the mix.

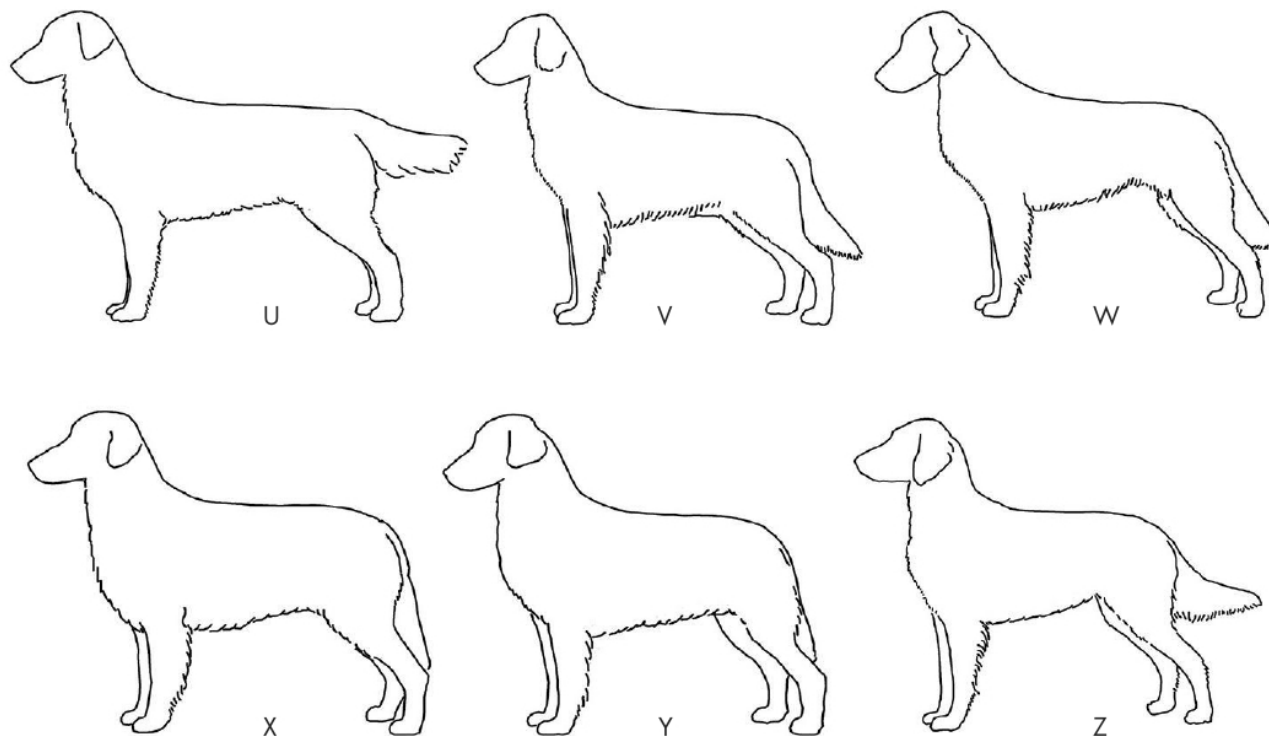
"Bad temperament" (1st) averaged more than two points ahead of the second place fault, corroborating its seriousness. Two points separated the averages of "Bad coat" (12th) and "Shaved neck" (13th) and between "Ears low set" (14th) and "Too heavy" (15th) confirming their lower rankings.

The experts were consistent between the two lists in movement, temperament, coat, and size. "One piece head" was the most important virtue, but "Too much stop/cheeky" which would ruin the head wasn't equivalently ranked.

Flat-Coated Retriever Outlines

Pick Best of Breed and Best of Opposite Sex

BITCHES



Outlines

The experts evaluated sets of outlines on the survey – six dogs and six bitches – judging them on outline only, placing them as one would do at a dog show. The outlines were made from photos of real Flat-Coated Retrievers so while all are good, none is perfect. The placements might change if the experts could judge the dogs in person, feel under the coat, watch them move, and see the whole dog.

The Flat-Coat male with the best average placement score was “B.” Those who picked him said “very moderate, nicely set smallish ear,” “best silhouette, best head but should have deeper muzzle,” “appropriate bone and coat, balanced angles,” “good proportions, proper length of leg,” “good prow and front,” “overall balance and silhouette, length of head, stop not exaggerated, length of neck and head carriage,” “masculine, but still elegant, one piece head with parallel planes, strong underjaw,” “strong muscled rear, correct length of rib,” “the whole package,” and “nice back length with strong topline, nice feet.”

The next best placement average among the dogs was “A.” Those who liked him best commented “proper silhouette, balance, good tail set, barely perceptible stop,” “classic,” “good bone, length of body, adequate prow, good topline,” “correct one piece head,

nice depth of chest, longer than tall, moderate tuck up, tail straight off back,” “best overall type,” “workmanlike, athletic body,” and “good feet.”

Bitch outlines “U” and “Y” had the same number of first placements, but the average placement for “Y” was better, so she was the winner among the females. Those who selected her noted “correct silhouette,” “nice proportions, decent head, balanced,” “mature, nice depth of body, pretty topline, moderate angles,” “nice ear set, nice prow,” “good length of neck,” “all the heads have too much stop, but Y most correct,” “deep chest, good forechest,” and “good tailset, turn of stifle, feet.”

Those who picked “U” said “correct length, excellent topline, croup, tailset,” “balanced angulation, excellent shoulder layback, and prow,” “pleasing head,” “lovely, nice ear placement, wagging tail,” “strong but elegant, feminine, lovely silhouette, strong topline, deep long ribs, moderate tuck-up, strong loin,” “front under her, moderate rear, acceptable head,” “love her outline and balance,” and “most breed type.”

Best of Breed was “B.” He had more first placements and the best placement average of all twelve outlines. Eleven experts named “B” BOB, more than any other. Next most often named was dog “A” with eight. Bitch “U” was the only bitch awarded BOB by more than one expert. More than one survey noted that they

BREED PRIORITIES - FLAT-COATED RETRIEVER

didn't care for the bitch outlines.

Dogs "B" and "A" were the only dogs that placed first. Every expert placed "B" first or second. "Y" and "U" both placed first on nine surveys. Bitch "X" was the only bitch not placed first on any survey.

"B" and "C" were the only outlines that placed on every survey. All others were out of the ribbons at least once. Dogs "D" and "E" and bitches "X" and "Z" were most often unplaced in their respective classes.

Essential Characteristics

The survey asked participants to name four to six essential characteristics that a good Flat-Coat must have. Named by almost every expert was the one piece head – molded, minimum stop, considering width of muzzle and skull, depth of muzzle, and fill. Next was the silhouette standing and moving, slightly longer than tall, with a deep chest and moderate tuck-up. Mentioned by half the group were movement (side gait, coming/going, smooth, effortless, ground covering), coat (length, texture, flat-lying), balance, and temperament (happy, wagging, outgoing). These reflect the defining distinctive and important features mentioned earlier.

Additional Notes

The Flat-Coated Retriever experts had these suggestions for students of their breed.

- Free stacking should be required before final placement; they should appear natural, move effortlessly.
- Don't overlook smaller dogs and bitches, because many in the ring are well over standard height.
- Flat-coats are moderate in every way; there is no difference between the show dog and hunting dog.
- A very distinctive silhouette, longer than tall, never cobby. Elegant, but never like a setter.
- Equal length of muzzle and skull is paramount with fill around the eyes. The muzzle must be strong enough to carry birds of all sizes.
- Temperament/confidence is the hallmark of the Flat-Coat.
- Judge the breed from the side standing and moving.
- While not a "head" breed, the silhouette isn't correct without a correct head.
- Floating, effortless movement is important.
- Ever wagging tail of utmost importance – they are the Peter Pan of retrievers.
- Many are owner-handled and not perfectly trained. Be patient and encouraging.
- Flat-coats with too much substance are few, but many have too little substance.
- A short stride in any sporting breed is not efficient.
- The head should be a long wedge divided in the center by an inconspicuous stop.
- If they can't move, they can't hunt.
- Coat moderate, never fluffy.
- Plain heads lack fill between and under eyes and have too

much stop.

- Soundness includes a good clean down and back as well as reach and drive.
- Power and elegance, and character are paramount.

Thank you so much to the Flat-Coated Retriever experts who contributed to this effort.

OFFICIAL STANDARD FOR THE FLAT-COATED RETRIEVER

General Appearance: The Flat-Coated Retriever is a versatile family companion hunting retriever with a happy and active demeanor, intelligent expression, and clean lines. The Flat-Coat has been traditionally described as showing "power without lumber and raciness without weediness." The distinctive and most important features of the Flat-Coat are the silhouette (both moving and standing), smooth effortless movement, head type, coat and character. In silhouette the Flat-Coat has a long, strong, clean, "one piece" head, which is unique to the breed. Free from exaggeration of stop or cheek, the head is set well into a moderately long neck which flows smoothly into well laid back shoulders. A level topline combined with a deep, long rib cage tapering to a moderate tuck-up create the impression of a blunted triangle. The brisket is well developed and the forechest forms a prominent prow. This utilitarian retriever is well balanced, strong, but elegant; never cobby, short legged or rangy. The coat is thick and flat lying, and the legs and tail are well feathered. A proud carriage, responsive attitude, waving tail and overall look of functional strength, quality, style and symmetry complete the picture of the typical Flat-Coat.

Judging the Flat-Coat moving freely on a loose lead and standing naturally is more important than judging him posed. Honorable scars should not count against the dog.

Size, Proportion, Substance: **Size** - Individuals varying more than an inch either way from the preferred height should be considered not practical for the types of work for which the Flat-Coat was developed. Preferred height is 23 to 24½ inches at the withers for dogs, 22 to 23½ inches for bitches. Since the Flat-Coat is a working hunting retriever he should be shown in lean, hard condition, free of excess weight.

Proportion - The Flat-Coat is not cobby in build. The length of the body from the point of the shoulder to the rearmost projection of the upper thigh is slightly more than the height at the withers. The female may be slightly longer to better accommodate the carrying of puppies. **Substance** - Moderate. Medium bone is flat or oval rather than round; strong but never massive, coarse, weedy or fine. This applies throughout the dog.

Head: The long, clean, well molded **head** is adequate in size and strength to retrieve a large pheasant, duck or hare with ease. **Skull and Muzzle** - The impression of the skull and muzzle being "cast in one piece" is created by the fairly flat skull of moderate breadth and flat, clean cheeks, combined with the long, strong, deep muzzle which is well filled in before, between and beneath the eyes. Viewed from above, the muzzle is nearly equal in length and breadth to the skull. **Stop** - There is a gradual, slight, barely perceptible stop, avoiding a down- or dish-faced appearance. Brows are slightly raised and mobile, giving life to the expression.